

# Early Modern German Nationalist Philosophers

## Document 1

Nature has sketched with mountain ranges which she fashioned and with streams which she caused to flow from them the rough but substantial outline of the whole history of man . . . One height produced nations of hunters, thus supporting and rendering necessary a savage state; another, more extended and mild, afforded a field to shepherd peoples and supplied them with tame animals; a third made agriculture easy and needful; while a fourth led to fishing and navigation and at length to trade. The structure of the earth, in its natural variety and diversity, rendered all such distinguishing conditions inescapable . . . Seas, mountain ranges and rivers are the most natural boundaries not only of lands but also of peoples, customs, languages and empires, and they have been, even in the greatest revolutions in human affairs, the directing lines or limits of world history. If otherwise mountains had arisen, rivers flowed, or coasts trended, then how very different would mankind have scattered over this tilting place of nations....

Nature brings forth families; the most natural state therefore is also one people, with a national character of its own. For thousands of years this character preserves itself within the people and, if the native princes concern themselves with it, it can be cultivated in the most natural way: for a people is as much a plant of nature as is a family, except that it has more branches. Nothing therefore seems more contradictory to the true end of governments than the endless expansion of states, the wild confusion of races and nations under one scepter. An empire made up of a hundred peoples and a 120 provinces which have been forced together is a monstrosity, not a state-body.

What is the supreme law which we note in all great historical events? In my opinion, it is this: that, in every part of our earth, all possible development is determined in part by the position and the necessities of the locality, in part by circumstances and the opportunities of the age, and in part by the inborn and self-nourishing character of the peoples.... All events in the human sphere, like all productions of nature, are decreed solely by time, locality, and national character, in short by the coordination of all the forces of life in their most positive individuality.

Active human powers are the springs of human history, and, as man originates from and in one race, so his body, education, and mode of thinking are genetic. Hence that striking national character, which, deeply imprinted on the most ancient peoples, is unequivocally displayed in all their operations on the earth. As the mineral water derives its component parts, its operative power, and its flavor from the soil through which it flows, so the ancient character of peoples arose from the family features, the climate, the way of life and education, the early actions and employments, that were peculiar to them. The manners of the fathers took deep root and became the internal prototype of the descendants. The mode of thinking of the Jews, which is best known to us from their writings and actions, may serve as an example: both in the land of their fathers and in the midst of other nations they remain as they were, and even when mixed with other peoples they may be distinguished for some generations onward. It was and is the same with all other peoples of antiquity—Egyptians, Chinese, Arabs, Hindus, etc. The more secluded they lived, nay frequently the more they were oppressed, the more their character was confirmed, so that, if every one of these nations had remained in its place, the earth might have been regarded as a garden where in one plot one human national plant, in another, another, bloomed in its proper form and nature, where in this corner one kind of national animal, in that, another, pursued its course according to its instincts and character....

Has a people anything dearer than the speech of its fathers? In its speech resides its whole thought-domain, its tradition, history, religion, and basis of life, all its heart and soul. To deprive a people of its speech is to deprive it of its one eternal good.... As God tolerates all the different languages in the world, so also should a ruler not only tolerate but honor the various languages of his peoples.... The best culture of a people cannot be expressed through a foreign language; it thrives on the soil of a nation most beautifully, and, I may say, it thrives only by means of the nation's inherited and inheritable dialect. With language is created the heart of a people; and is it not a high concern, amongst so many peoples—Hungarians, Slavs, Rumanians, etc.—to plant seeds of well-being for the far future and in the way that is dearest and most

appropriate to them? . . .

The savage who loves himself, his wife, and his child with quiet joy and glows with limited activity for his tribe as for his own life is, it seems to me, a more genuine being than that cultured shade who is enchanted by the shadow of his whole species.... In his poor hut, the former finds room for every stranger, receives him as a brother with impartial good humor and never asks whence he came. The inundated heart of the idle cosmopolitan is a home for no one....

No greater injury can be inflicted on a nation than to be robbed of her national character, the peculiarity of her spirit and her language. Reflect on this and you will perceive our irreparable loss. Look about you in Germany for the character of the nation, for their own particular cast of thought, for their own peculiar vein of speech; where are they? Read Tacitus; there you will find their character: "The tribes of Germany, who never degrade themselves by mingling with others, form a peculiar, unadulterated, original nation, which is its own archetype. Even their physical development is universally uniform, despite the large numbers of the people," and so forth. Now look about you and say: "The tribes of Germany have been degraded by mingling with others; they have sacrificed their natural disposition in protracted intellectual servitude; and, since they have, in contrast to others, imitated a tyrannical prototype for a long time, they are, among all the nations of Europe, the least true to themselves." . . .

If Germany were only guided by the forces of the age, by the leading strings of her own culture, our intellectual disposition would doubtless be poor and restricted; but it would be true to our own soil, fashioned upon its own model, and not so misshapen and cast down....

**SOURCE:** Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Materials for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, 1784.

## Document 2

is truly love, and not a mere transitory lust, never clings to what is transient; only in the eternal does it awaken and become kindled, and there alone does it rest. Man is not able to love even himself unless he conceives himself as eternal; apart from that he cannot even respect, much less approve, of himself. Still less can he love anything outside himself without taking it up into the eternity of his faith and of his soul and binding it thereto. He who does not first regard himself as eternal has in him no love of any kind, and, moreover, cannot love a fatherland, a thing which for him does not exist. He who regards his invisible life as eternal, but not his visible life as similarly eternal, may perhaps have a heaven and therein a fatherland, but here below he has no fatherland, for this, too, is regarded only in the image of eternity—eternity visible and made sensuous, and for this reason also he is unable to love his fatherland. If none has been handed down to such a man, he is to be pitied. But he to whom a fatherland has been handed down, and in whose soul heaven and earth, visible and invisible meet and mingle, and thus, and only thus, create a true and enduring heaven—such a man fights to the last drop of his blood to hand on the precious possession unimpaired to his posterity.

Hence, the noble-minded man will be active and effective, and will sacrifice himself for his people. Life merely as such, the mere continuance of changing existence, has in any case never had any value for him, he has wished for it only as the source of what is permanent. But this permanence is promised to him only by the continuous and independent existence of his nation. In order to save his nation he must be ready even to die that it may live, and that he may live in it the only life for which he has ever wished.

So it has always been, although it has not always been expressed in such general terms and so clearly as we express it here. What inspired the men of noble mind among the Romans, whose frame of mind and way of thinking still live and breathe among us in their works of art, to struggles and sacrifices, to patience and endurance for the fatherland? They themselves express it often and distinctly. It was their firm belief in the eternal continuance of their Roma, and their confident expectation that they themselves would eternally continue to live in this eternity in the stream of time. In so far as this belief was well-founded, and they themselves would have comprehended it if they had been entirely clear in their own minds, it did not deceive them. To this very day there still lives in our midst what was truly eternal in their eternal Roma. . .

In this belief in our earliest common forefathers, the original stock of the new culture, the Germans, as

the Romans called them, bravely resisted the oncoming world dominion of the Romans. Did they not have before their eyes the greater brilliance of the Roman provinces next to them and the more refined enjoyments in those provinces, to say nothing of laws and judges--seats and lectors--axes and fasces in superfluity? Were not the Romans willing enough to let them share in all these blessings? In the case of several of their own princes, who did no more than intimate that war against such benefactors of mankind was rebellion, did they not experience proofs of the belauded Roman clemency? To those who submitted the Romans gave marks of distinction in the form of kingly titles, high commands in their armies, and Roman fillets; and if they were driven out by their countrymen, did not the Romans provide for them a place of refuge and a means of subsistence in their colonies? Had they no appreciation of the advantages of Roman civilization, of the superior organization of their armies, in which even Arminius did not disdain to learn the trade of war? Their descendants, as soon as they could do so without losing their freedom, even assimilated Roman culture, so far as this was possible without losing their individuality.

Freedom to them meant just this: remaining Germans and continuing to settle their own affairs, independently and in accordance with the original spirit of their race, going on with their development in accordance with the same spirit, and propagating this independence in their posterity. All those blessings which the Romans offered them meant slavery to them because then they would have to become something that was not German, they would have to become half-Roman. They assumed as a matter of course that every man would rather die than become half a Roman, and that a true German could only want to live in order to be, and to remain, just a German and to bring up his children as Germans.

They did not all die; they did not see slavery; they bequeathed freedom to their children. It is their unyielding resistance which the whole modern world has to thank for being what it now is. Had the Romans succeeded in bringing them also under the yoke and in destroying them as a nation, which the Romans did in every case, the whole development of the human race would have taken a different course, a course that one cannot think would have been more satisfactory. It is they whom we must thank--we, the immediate heirs of their soil, their language, and their way of thinking--for being Germans still, for being still borne along on the stream of original and independent life. It is they whom we must thank for everything that we have been as a nation since those days, and to them we shall be indebted for everything that we shall be in the future, unless things come to an end with us now and the last drop of blood inherited from them has dried up in our veins. To them the other branches of the race, whom we now look upon as foreigners, but who by descent from them are our brothers, are indebted for their very existence. When our ancestors triumphed over Roma the eternal, not one of all these peoples was in existence, but the possibility of their existence in the future was won for them in the same fight. . . .

**SOURCE:** Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Address to the German Nation*, 1807.

### Document 3

The state is the actuality of the ethical Idea. . . . The state is absolutely rational inasmuch as it is the actuality of the substantial will which it possesses in the particular self-consciousness once that consciousness has been raised to consciousness of its universality. This substantial unity is an absolute unmoved end in itself, in which freedom comes into its supreme right. On the other hand this final end has supreme right against the individual, whose supreme duty is to be a member of the state.

If the state is confused with civil society, and if its specific end is laid down as the security and protection of property and personal freedom, then the interest of the individuals as such becomes the ultimate end of their association, and it follows that membership of the state is something optional. But the state's relation to the individual is quite different from this. Since the state is mind objectified, it is only as one of its members that the individual himself has objectivity, genuine individuality, and an ethical life. Unification pure and simple is the true content and aim of the individual, and the individual's destiny is the living of a universal life. His further particular satisfaction, activity, and mode of conduct have this substantive and universally valid life as their starting point and their result.

. . . if we ask what is or has been the historical origin of the state in general, still more if we ask about the

origin of any particular state, of its rights and institutions, or again if we inquire whether the state originally arose out of patriarchal conditions or out of fear or trust, or out of Corporations, &c., or been conceived and consciously established, whether this basis has been supposed to be positive divine right, or contract, custom, &c.--all these questions are no concern of the Idea of the state. We are here dealing exclusively with the philosophic science of the state, and from that point of view all these things are mere appearance and therefore matters for history. So far as the authority of any existing state has anything to do with reasons, these reasons are culled from the forms of the law authoritative within it.

The philosophical treatment of these topics is concerned only with their inward side, with the thought of their concept. The merit of Rousseau's contribution to the search for this concept is that, by adducing the will as the principle of the state, he is adducing a principle indeed which is thinking itself, not a principle, like gregarious instinct, for instance, or divine authority, which has thought as its form only. Unfortunately, however, as [Johann Gottlieb] Fichte did later, he takes the will regards the universal will not as the absolutely rational element in the will, but only as a "general" will which proceeds out of this individual will as out of a conscious will. The result is that he reduces the union of individuals in the state to a contract and therefore to something based on their arbitrary wills, their opinion, and their capriciously given express consent; and abstract reasoning proceeds to draw the logical inferences which destroy the absolutely divine principle of the state, together with its majesty and absolute authority. For this reason, when these abstract conclusions came into power, they afforded for the first time in human history the prodigious spectacle of the overthrow of the constitution of a great actual state and its complete reconstruction *ab initio* on the basis of pure thought alone, after the destruction of all existing and given material. The will of its re-founders was to give it what they alleged was a purely rational basis, but it was only abstractions that were being used; the Idea was lacking; and the experiment ended in the maximum of frightfulness and terror.

Confronted with the claims made for the individual will, we must remember the fundamental conception that the objective will is rationality implicit or in conception, whether it be recognized or not by individuals, whether there whims be deliberately for its or not. We must remember that its opposite, i.e., knowing and willing, or subjective freedom (the only thing contained in the principle of the individual will) comprises only one moment, and therefore a one-sided moment, of the Idea of the rational will, i.e., of the will which is rational solely because of what it is implicitly, that it also is explicitly. The Idea of the state a) has immediate actuality and is the individual state as a self-dependent organism--the Constitution or Constitutional Law; b) passes over into the relation of one state to other states --International Law; c) is the universal idea as a genus and as an absolute power over individual states--the mind which gives itself its actuality in the process of World-History.

The state is the actuality of concrete freedom. But concrete freedom consists in this, that personal individuality and its particular interests not only achieve their complete development and gain explicit recognition of their right (as they do in the sphere of the family and civil society) but, for one thing, they also pass over of their own accord into the interest of the universal, and, for another thing, they know and will the universal; they even recognize it as their own substantive mind; they take it is their end and aim and are active in its pursuit....

**SOURCE:** G. W. Friedrich Hegel, excerpts from *The Philosophy of History*, 1837.